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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 001695

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DEPT FOR EUR/WE, NEA/IAI

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TAGS: PREL IS XF US IT MEPP

SUBJECT: ITALY'S MFA REQUESTS GEN. ZINNI TO SERVE AS
MEDIATOR IN BETHLEHEM

CLASSIFIED BY: DCM WILLIAM POPE FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

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¶1. (C) ON APRIL 4, LUCA FERRARI, MFA'S OFFICE DIRECTOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST, CONTACTED NEA WATCHER TO EXPRESS THE GOI'S GRAVE CONCERN OVER THE SITUATION IN BETHLEHEM. ACCORDING TO FERRARI, TANZIM MILITANTS, PALESTINIAN CIVILIANS, AND THE GOVERNOR OF BETHLEHEM (WHOM HE DESCRIBED AS A "MODERATE CHRISTIAN") HAVE TAKEN REFUGE INSIDE THE HOLY COMPLEX IN BETHLEHEM (WHICH INCLUDES THE CHURCH OF NATIVITY) AND ARE SURROUNDED BY ISRAELI TANKS.

¶2. (C) THE GOI WISHES TO FIND A MEDIATOR BETWEEN THE TWO SIDES. THE SUGGESTION OF HAVING THE FRENCH, ITALIAN, SPANISH, OR BELGIAN CG IN JERUSALEM SERVE AS THE MEDIATOR HAS BEEN REFUSED BY BOTH SIDES. THE SUGGESTION OF HAVING EU SECRETARY GENERAL JAVIER SOLANA SERVE AS MEDIATOR WAS REFUSED

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BY THE ISRAELIS, SAID FERRARI.

¶3. (C) FERRARI ADDED THAT THE GOI NOW WISHES TO HAVE GEN. ZINNI SERVE AS THE MEDIATOR BETWEEN THE TWO SIDES. WHEN ASKED WHY GEN. ZINNI, FERRARI ANSWERED: "GEN. ZINNI IS AMERICAN, CATHOLIC, AND A MILITARY MAN".

¶4. (C) ACCORDING TO FERRARI, THE SAME REQUEST OF HAVING GEN. ZINNI SERVE AS MEDIATOR IN BETHLEHEM WILL BE MADE APRIL 4 BY THE ITALIAN CG AND ITALIAN AMBASSADOR TO OUR CG AND OUR AMBASSADOR IN JERUSALEM AND TEL AVIV, RESPECTIVELY. THE ITALIAN EMBASSY IN WASHINGTON IS ALSO EXPECTED TO DELIVER THE SAME REQUEST TO THE DEPARTMENT APRIL 4.

¶5. (C) IN A MEETING APRIL 4 BETWEEN AMBASSADOR SEMBLER AND PM BERLUSCONI, THE PM DID NOT RAISE THE SITUATION IN BETHLEHEM BUT SPOKE IN MORE GENERAL TERMS ABOUT THE CONFLICT IN THE

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MIDDLE EAST AND THE NEED FOR THE US TO INVOLVE THE EU, RUSSIA, AND FRIENDLY ARAB COUNTRIES AND HAVE THEM SHARE IN THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SEEKING A PEACEFUL SOLUTION TO THE CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: ITALY'S SENSE OF URGENCY COULD PARTLY BE EXPLAINED BY THE FACT THAT, UP UNTIL APRIL 4, THERE WERE FIVE ITALIAN JOURNALISTS TRAPPED IN THE CHURCH OF NATIVITY. AN ITALIAN JOURNALIST WAS ALSO KILLED RECENTLY IN THE MIDDLE EAST VIOLENCE. END COMMENT.

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